

Michael W. Charney. *Southeast Asian Warfare, 1300-1900*. xix + 319pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Leiden: Brill. 2004. ISBN 900-14240-1.

This book is certain to become the definitive work on warfare in pre-modern Southeast Asia. It is part of the “Handbook of Oriental Studies” series (the series editors include three luminaries of pre-modern Southeast Asian history: Victor R. Lieberman, M.C. Ricklefs, and D.K Wyatt) published by Brill Academic Publishers in the Netherlands. J. C. Eade’s treatise on the Southeast Asian calendar is another essential text in the series.

The present work fills a long-standing gap in the literature for pre-modern Southeast Asia. The last book length survey of pre-modern Southeast Asian warfare was published in 1952 by Quaritch Wales. Charney’s book effectively expands and replaces the chapter on warfare in Reid’s magnum opus *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*. It also complements Lieberman’s new work on comparative world history (2003). Where Lieberman’s book zooms out to examine long-term historical trends, this book zooms in to examine the practices and material culture of warfare. It is also an engaging read for Southeast Asian history enthusiasts. Everyone I shared the book with took an immediate interest in the chapter, “Culture and Warfare,” including sections on “Prowess, Headhunting, and Women,” “Battlefield Formations, Oaths, and Rituals,” “Bravery and Stimulants,” “Invulnerability,” and “Bloodshed.” The chapter on elephants also captured their interest. The book treats in equal measure both insular Southeast Asia and the three regions of mainland Southeast Asia (Burmese, Thai/Tai, Vietnamese). The writer’s specialization in pre-modern Burmese history has allowed him to draw on primary sources in the Burmese and Mon languages under-utilized by Western historians of Southeast Asia, so the reader definitely can expect fresh and thought-provoking ideas originating from Charney’s close-reading of these sources.

If I could risk extrapolating an overall theme for this book which is a comprehensive and detailed work, it would be the well-adapted nature of Southeast Asian war-making technologies and practices to local geography and everyday life, how these technologies and practices were challenged by technologies and practices outside of the region (Europe, China, and the Muslim

World), how these new technologies and practices gradually pushed out and replaced indigenous ones, and finally how the re-adoption of indigenous practices in the late nineteenth century proved resilient in resisting the final efforts of colonial powers to subjugate the interiors of states (Burma, Vietnam, Philippines) (pp. xvii-xviii). The book disproves “the old misconception, still lingering, that Southeast Asia was solely an importer and not an innovator of ideas...[or] technologies” (p. 276).

For an avid reader of Burmese chronicle texts like myself, this handbook provides background information that fills in missing details and unanswered questions such as: How did armies recruit, feed, cloth, and arm themselves? What role did food supplies play in warfare? Where did the horses in the cavalry come from? What kind of fighting took place during river battles? How were fortifications built and defended? The detailed descriptions provided in the book create a rich context of the “way things are likely to have been” versus the Rankean best-case “way they actually were” to supplement the lack of reliable detail often found in pre-modern Southeast Asian primary sources.

Great care has been taken in the organization of the book and in providing meaningful topics and titles for each section in each chapter. These topics provide a taxonomy of important ideas that will help guide further research in the area. To give readers an idea of how extensive, detailed, and useful these topics are, a brief survey is given here. The chapter on “Personal Weaponry” includes sections on metal weaponry, projectile weaponry (bow and arrow, crossbow, blowpipe), and armour (shields, body armour). Since access to firearms was restricted to elite, specialized groups close to the throne, the great mass of conscripted soldiers had to rely on their own ‘low-tech’ weapons. The sword was a tool of everyday life used for such varied purposes as building houses, the harvesting of food, and personal protection from wild animals. Other personal weapons included the spear, lance, pike or long lance, and the javelin. There is also a detailed discussion of the Malaysian *kris* (p. 29-31) and its significance for Malay culture.

The chapter on “Firearms” includes sections on heavy arms, small arms, gunpowder, the royal arsenal, and training. The standard debate on the Chinese, Indian, or European origin of firearms technologies and their relative efficiencies is reviewed. The general theme of the firearms section is that a royal monopoly

on firearms prevented firearms from getting into the hands of enemies and rebellious factions at court. This royal monopoly was enforced by keeping firearms in a special royal arsenal at the capital. Tight royal control of firearms, however, made it difficult to provide troops with adequate training in marksmanship. One consequence of this was the importance of personal weaponry for the great mass of conscripted soldiers used in military expeditions. The description of the arsenal as being a sort of hodge-podge horde of weapons collected during consecutive victories over the course of different periods, each of them requiring specialized skills and ammunition to use, gives a flavor of the constraints Southeast Asian states faced in adopting Western technologies and practices. Other memorable parts of this section include the discussion of how firearms were treated as sacred objects in need of propitiation and the way Vietnamese artillery forces drilled themselves to degrees of accuracy that impressed all Westerners that came into contact with them. The way in which the author eschews theorizing for historical fact and detail can be seen in the precise descriptions of the cavalcade of changes in firearms technology during the late nineteenth century such as firing pins, rifling, and machine guns that eventually ensured success in the final drive to colonize.

The chapter on “Fortifications and Sieges” includes sections on the importance of siege warfare, building materials, and siege weaponry and tactics. This section has to be read in tandem with the sections on “Bloodshed” and “Manpower” because the author begins this section by critically examining and challenging some of the commonly-held assumptions about pre-modern Southeast Asian warfare from Reid’s work, such as uniformly low levels of bloodshed to maximize the number of war captives taken, i.e. “flight rather than fight.”

To give a concrete idea of how this book can be useful, I will include here an example from my own reading of historical sources. While reading the Ming dynasty annals (Wade, 2005), I came across the term “stockade” used several times in strange contexts. I was led to question precisely what was meant by a “stockade.” What qualified as a “stockade” and what did not? Luckily, the section in the book on “Building Materials” used in fortifications provides nine pages describing different types of stockades and how they contrasted with brick and stone fortifications (pp. 82-90),

including such details as how thorny bush and sharpened bamboo stakes were used as a sort of barbed wire (pp. 92-93). Further into the book, a diagram shows how the British imitated indigenous Burmese stockades when fighting in the interior (pp. 272-273). More permanent building materials such as stone and brick are also shown to create problems such as making it difficult to expand the fortification to shelter more food and supplies (p. 82) and the necessity of sometimes destroying fortifications lest they fall into rebel or enemy hands (p. 83). Other memorable parts of this chapter include descriptions of siege engines, Vauban-style fortresses in Vietnam that imitated European designs (p. 87), and how house ladders in Sumatra ("notched pieces of timber or bamboo"), a technology of everyday life, were used as siege ladders.

The chapter on "Sea and River Warfare" includes sections on fleet size and shipbuilding, sea and river vessels, oars and sails, crews and oarsmen, blockades and maritime sieges, river tactics, and European competition. This section is also informed by specialized research that the author has done on the fleets used in Burmese river warfare (Charney, 1997). The author demonstrates the importance of naval warfare (in addition to the siege) in pre-modern Southeast Asia. The role of the Irrawaddy River as an efficient transportation artery for troops and supplies appears again at the end of the book when the author discusses how the British used the Irrawaddy river to quickly extend control over the country in the Third Anglo-Burmese war.

The chapter on "Elephants" includes sections on elephants and society, numbers and supply (elephant hunts), transport, training, field application, and their declining use. The section on the vulnerability and "declining use" of elephants is especially interesting. The graphic and clinical description of elephants musting is essential for any budding Southeast Asian historian.

The chapter on "Horses and Cavalry" includes sections on horsemanship and society, supply and breeds, field application, eighteenth-century revival, and nineteenth-century decline. This section goes well beyond the narrow cavalry tactics focus of traditional military history, investigating instead the whole social and environmental context in which horses were used. In addition to the use of cavalry on the battlefield to provide an element of surprise, the use of horses during sieges and for intelligence and communication (pp. 177-182) is covered. The differences between

different breeds of ponies (Burmese, Shan, Javanese, Sumatran, Timorese, etc) in terms of endurance, stamina, and speed are covered (pp. 172-5). Trends in cavalry usage in different Southeast Asian societies and the relationship between social status and mounts are covered (pp. 165-169). Different kinds of military contests involving horses and elephants (pp. 166, 168-9), how they fought together, and how horses eventually replaced elephants on the battlefield are also discussed.

The chapter on "Supply and Transport" includes sections on timing the campaign, supply, roads and bridges, and the baggage train. Supply and transport may be one of the less academically or intellectually glamorous aspects of warfare, but the author leaves no stone unturned. He shows how the attack and defense of the food supply of pre-modern states could often determine the outcome of warfare (pp. 195-198). The practices of choosing auspicious departure dates for military campaigns, roads (more likely cart paths), the difficulty of building roads, and how roads contrasted with the efficiency of river transportation are all examined here. The role of draft animals and carts, the unsung heroes of the baggage train, is also covered (pp. 203-212).

The chapter on "Soldiers" includes sections on manpower, levies, conscription, mercenaries, royal guard to standing army, organization, pay, uniforms, command and tactology (officers and the theory of war). This is an important chapter since social structure was often organized around warfare. The high military participation rates typically found in the region, how conscription and troop levies from tributary states supplied the great bulk of manpower for military expeditions, remuneration (mostly land allotments in return for service and only rarely pay), the use of mercenaries, and the formation of an elite royal guard centered around the palace that later provided the basis for standing armies similar to those of the European colonial powers are all described at length.

The chapter on "The Nineteenth-Century" provides a climax and denouement for the work as a whole and includes sections on small arms, coasts and rivers, river wars, the interior, tactics, the machine gun, cavalry, and the fortress system. The adoption of European technologies and the creation of paid standing armies with uniforms failed to hold off European encroachments for long. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asian states

were falling even further behind in an arms race that made it progressively easier for Western states to conquer and control Southeast Asian states. The author shows how the advent and impact of Western military technologies including rifling, the steamboat, and the machine gun conditioned military outcomes in three different, but parallel theatres of war: the British in Upper Burma, the French in Vietnam, and the United States in the Philippines. The Europeans found conquest and control of the coastal and river areas easy, but the conquest of the interior difficult. The guerilla warfare that plagued Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era can be seen here in its embryonic form (pp. 262-266). Covert arms sales are blocked and attempts to match Western military technologies fail.

Finally, it should be noted that this handbook is likely to be of interest to scholars working in a wide variety of fields including Southeast Asian history, archaeology, and literature, political science, history and anthropology of warfare, European colonial history, world history, and the history of technology. Whether you are doing research, preparing for PhD oral exams, or want to capture the reality of pre-modern Southeast Asian warfare in a novel, film, war game, or vacation, this handbook will provide the essential background. There's only one request I would like to make of the author, that he write another book investigating pre-modern warfare in Burma, his specialty, in greater depth.

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